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Cassio de Oliveira

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ABSTRACT: The present article is devoted to an analysis of Gogol''s last story from his Ukrainian cycle, "The Story of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarrelled with Ivan Nikiforovich"; it makes use of canonical as well as innovative approaches to Gogol''s tale in order to explore the significance of the epilogue to an interpretation of the story as a whole. The examination will encompass ideas on the temporal aspects of the narration, the philosophical concept of ennui/*skuka*, and the possible significance of the camera obscura as the setting for one of the key moments in the story. Whereas the camera obscura is the setting of the quarrel between the two main characters, the story ends with a manifestation of *skuka* from the narrator: how do these two elements relate to each other, and what do they suggest in terms of the possibility of reaching an all-encompassing interpretation of the 'Two Ivans'?

In her analysis of the "pragmatics of insignificance" in Russian literature, Cathy Popkin divides Nikolai Gogol' (1809–1852) scholars in two groups: those who have "the inclination to see Gogol's distended discourse as somehow purposeful,"[1] and those who "refuse to posit a hidden meaning everywhere in Gogol's clutter."[2] The two approaches represent the fundamental interpretive devices that scholars adopt in analyses of works by Gogol': when faced with the abundance of seemingly useless descriptions and the richness of detail in elements that are not essential to the plot of his tales, short stories and novels, scholars realize that they need to account for these elements in studies that regard a certain work in principle as a coherent whole. How effective are these approaches? How much is elided in the reduction of Gogol''s idiosyncrasies to rhetorical exhibitionism, and how much is overstated in Gogol''s obsessive need of detail in an attempt to submit the entire work to an all-encompassing semiotic pattern? If, alternatively, a combination of these approaches should be adopted as an interpretive scheme, then where can the limits of each framework be drawn? How can the critics avoid reading too much into an element that apparently serves solely the performative aspect of the work? And how can they know that an element that serves some purpose in the wider perspective of the literary work is not there solely for the purpose of its performance? The present

I am grateful to Kate Rowan Holland, Irina Reyfman, and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on drafts.

[1] Cathy Popkin, *The Pragmatics of Insignificance: Chekhov, Zoshchenko, Gogol* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) 139.

[2] Popkin 134.

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article examines possible answers to these questions in relation to an early work by Gogol'.

"It's dull in this world, gentlemen!"[3] ("*Skuchno na etom svete, gospoda!*"[4]): thus ends the "Povest' o tom, kak possorilsia Ivan Ivanovich s Ivanom Nikiforovichem" [The Story of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarrelled with Ivan Nikiforovich], the last story in *Mirgorod* (first published in 1834). As Ivan Ermakov writes, the reader is frequently faced with "something hopeless and futile"[5] when reading Gogol'. His tales, such as "Nos" [The Nose], with its final assertion that "such incidents do happen in the world—rarely, but they do happen,"[6] skirt an explanation for the events of the story. "Shinel'" [The Overcoat], with the inconclusive appearance at the end of a ghost that does not resemble the ghost of Akakii Akakievich, ends "without arriving at a resolution somehow; after every tale, which was not quite finished the way its author wanted to finish it, there follows a whole chain of painfully alarming questions and simultaneously of inescapable and unanswerable questions."[7] Many such unanswerable questions are raised at the end of the tale of the two Ivans. What is the point of the story? Will a verdict on the lawsuits of both Ivans ever come out? Will things ever return to the way they were in Mirgorod? How are we to interpret the tale in view of its conclusion, of its last sentence, at once sad, anguished, and ironic?

This sentence and the entire last section of the tale, set more than a decade after the main events, have been interpreted in many different ways: Grigorii Gukovskii, for example, reads the narrator's exclamation as a conclusion to the entire volume of tales of *Mirgorod*, and in this sense as a lament on the absence of heroes such as the ones from *Taras Bul'ba* and their replacement with characters such as Ivan Nikiforovich: "the elevated in humankind has been crushed by the crust of mediocrity (*koroi zemnosti*), and legend has been displaced by the vulgarity of commonness (*poshlosti obydenshchiny*)."[8]

To Vsevolod Setchkarev, the sentence "sounds like a last judgment, like the final product of a philosophical conception of the world, precisely because it

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[3] Nikolai Gogol, *The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol,* translated and annotated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998) 241.

[4] Nikolai V. Gogol', *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii (PSS),* 2 vol. (Leningrad: Akademiia Nauk SSSR, 1937) 276.

[5] Ivan D. Ermakov, "Povest' o tom, kak possorilsia Ivan Ivanovich s Ivanom Nikiforovichem," in *Psikhoanaliz literatury: Pushkin, Gogol', Dostoevskii,* edited by Militrisa I. Davydova (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1999) 222. My translation.

[6] Gogol, *Collected Tales* 326.

[7] The end of the citation in the original reads as follows: "...мучительно тревожных вопросов и в то же время вопросов безысходных." Ermakov 222.

[8] Grigorii A. Gukovskii, *Realizm Gogolia* (Moscow; Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1959) 224. My translation.

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stands at the end of such a lively, such a tremendously amusing story."[9] Furthermore, Setchkarev sees in the final exclamation not only a reflection of the narrator's *weltanschauung*, but also a reflection on the impossibility to relive and to be part of that lively world that he had described earlier: "a senseless confusion of human desires and strivings that appear so important and so colourful when one participates in them oneself, but seen from the outside they turn into an irrelevant grayness."[10] Setchkarev's remark is also important in showing that the matter here is not only of temporal opposition—the later Mirgorod being more dreary than the earlier one—but also of *spatial* opposition—namely, that the narrator, even though he is back in Mirgorod, does not consider himself a part of that world, that he is coming from outside of it and can no longer be part of it.

Donald Fanger also takes into consideration the temporal break created by the sentence; to him, the final exclamation introduces the theme of "the instability of the comic attitude. The narrator's cry is a reaction to a particular kind of writing which constitutes experience instead of dealing with it—and which, like many pleasures, exists only in process and leaves behind only a sense of absence."[11] Adopting Fanger's point of view, the narrator's final line could be regarded as being opposed to everything that preceded it, as the text was based to such a large extent on the power of language to suggest the lavishness of the banquet and the beauty of the buildings in Mirgorod, or to conjure the idea of the main characters as morally irreprehensible men and touchingly good friends. Fanger's claim thus sheds light on the performative character of Gogol''s writing, at the same time that it emphasizes the fact that the narrator's final reaction against this type of writing seemingly expresses a yearning towards a sort of transcendence of the purely literary character of the text. At the same time, however, this "voice newly aware of time and distance"[12] that reflects on the dreariness of the world at the end of the tale is not only a commentary on the performative character of language and literature, but also in itself an echo of the rhetorical, but no less genuine, question from Ivan Ivanovich in Chapter 2: "What is there that I haven't got?"[13] Thus the final exclamation, in a sense, does not manage to rule out this performative character

[9] Vsevolod Setchkarev, *Gogol: His Life and Works* (New York: New York University Press, 1965) 148.

[10] Setchkarev 148.

[11] Donald Fanger, *The Creation of Nikolai Gogol* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979) 107–108.

[12] Fanger 107.

[13] Gogol, *Collected Tales* 199. The Russian text reads "Чего ж ещё нет у меня?" (Gogol', *PSS* 2: 228), so a more precise translation would be "What is there that I *still* haven't got?"

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of the text altogether, as it recapitulates the yearning for the weapon that lies at the core of the dispute between Ivan Ivanovich and Ivan Nikiforovich.

To Richard Gregg, the last sentence of the story is a reference to the "gray terminal mood"[14] of the city of Mirgorod, as the hostilities between the two former friends are still not reconciled after years go by. Echoing Setchkarev, Gregg writes that at the end of the 'Two Ivans' "Mirgorod presents a picture of unrelieved dreariness and monotony that contrasts antipodally with the bright and motley scenes which animate the opening pages."[15] Yet it is important to bear in mind the role of the narrator in creating this temporal contrast, as it is his exaltation that causes the scenes in the beginning—i.e., Ivan Ivanovich's dialog with the old woman outside the church; Ivan Nikiforovich's habit of lying naked at home or outside during warm days—to be characterized as "bright and motley."

These scholars base their assertions on the notion that whatever the narrator writes, particularly if it is located in a semiotically privileged position in the text, such as the last sentence, is significant to determining the dominant and overarching themes and motifs of the tale: the final, world-weary exclamation of a narrator who earlier had extolled the beauty of Ivan Ivanovich's jacket, the fascination of Mirgorod's night, the luxuriousness of a banquet must certainly contribute to providing a fitting close to the tale, one that might encapsulate in it, as Fanger writes, the sense of time having gone by and, as Gregg writes, the difference between the present and the once-harmonious and exciting past of Mirgorod.

As the question of the narrative persona arises in the present discussion—and the seeming incongruity between his style in the main part of the text (until the last section of the last chapter) and the epilogue becomes evident—it also becomes necessary to establish two assumptions that shall guide the investigation of the internal chronology of the tale in the following pages. First of all, it will be assumed that the narrator must have been an actual witness of at least a part of the events described in the tale, namely the earliest important event, the quarrel in Ivan Nikiforovich's house. The second assumption is that the narrator in the epilogue is the same "character" as the narrator in the main section. This assumption would be rejected by Robert Maguire, for example, who claims that "It is implausible... that the addle-pated bumpkin who opens the story could, even with the passage of twelve years, evolve into the world-weary commentator who closes it. They are two different voices... not two aspects of one 'character'. In fact, they are not characters at all."[16] Yet, from a narratological point of view, and in the absence of any evidence of these

[14] Richard Gregg, "The Curse of Sameness and the Gogolian Esthetic: 'The Tale of Two Ivans' as Parable," *Slavic and East European Journal* 31.1 (1987): 6.

[15] Gregg 6.

[16] Robert Maguire, *Exploring Gogol* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994) 198.

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narrators' different identities (à la the introduction to Aleksandr Pushkin's *Povesti Belkina* [Belkin Tales], in which the authorship of each of the tales is attributed to a different character), they must necessarily be viewed as the same "character" for the purposes of this discussion. Beyond their existences as narrative voices, these narrators also possess literary "lives" of their own. The first narrator writes about eating when describing the banquet (although it is uncertain whether he actually did eat at the banquet or he is declaring his preference for eating over writing about food in a general sense); furthermore, the "boy in the boundless frock coat, who stood quite calmly and cleaned his nose with the finger"[17] in Ivan Nikiforovich's house during the quarrel could be a self-portrait of the narrator. If so, then it is also likely that, at the banquet, "the tall, lean man in the cotton flannel frock coat with a plaster on his nose, who till then had been sitting in the corner and had never once changed the movement of his face, even when a fly flew up his nose,"[18] may be the same boy, grown up by then. As for the narrator of the epilogue, he writes about passing through Mirgorod while "traveling on important business,"[19] and meeting the two Ivans in the town. For purposes of the discussion of the time relations in the story, therefore, it will be assumed that the 'Two Ivans' has a single narrator throughout.

Yet this is a single narrator who has changed considerably upon his return to Mirgorod in the epilogue. As Fanger points out, the narrator's final exclamation is as much a result of the bad weather on the day of his visit to the town as it is "a comment on this kind of comic narrative, consonant with everything that has preceded it. There is no new narrator, only a voice newly aware of time and distance, depressed by the weather, as he had formerly been inspired by the play of sunlight."[20] The idea that the narrator's exclamation might be related to his experience at that moment in the narrative, and not necessarily to the entire story, is also suggested by Iurii Lotman, who introduces in the discussion "the conception of the multiplicity of spaces, in which, moving from one space to the other, the individual is deformed according to the laws of that space. The Enlightenment conception of the dependence of the individual on the environment... is only a particular manifestation (more precisely, one of the interpretations)"[21] of the conception of multiplicity of spaces. It makes sense indeed to think of the narrator, in Gogol''s conception, as someone whose

[17] Gogol, *Collected Tales* 208.

[18] Gogol, *Collected Tales* 231.

[19] Gogol, *Collected Tales* 241.

[20] Fanger 107.

[21] Iurii M. Lotman, "Problema khudozhestvennogo prostranstva v proze Gogolia," in *Stat'i po semiotike i tipologii kul'tury*, edited by Iurii M. Lotman, vol. 1 (Tallinn: Aleksandra, 1992) 435. My translation.

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outlook on the world surrounding him is modulated by the *space* in which he is located at that moment, or at least by his memories of the different places he went through. That might explain the joyful tone expressed in the first chapter as well as the narrator's eruptions of sycophantic commentary on the food at the party, or more often on Ivan Ivanovich's behaviour, which are often expressed by means of preterition (or apophasis), a figure of speech—corresponding in rhetoric to the "ineffability topos" in theological discourse—"in which attention is drawn to something by professing to omit it."[22]

One example of preterition is the passage at the courtroom, when, after describing Ivan Ivanovich's repeated attempts to politely refuse a cup of tea, culminating with his giving in and accepting a cup, the narrator writes "*It's impossible to describe* what a pleasant impression such behavior makes!"[23] Such instances of a subverted "ineffability topos"—the acknowledgement, by the writer, of the impossibility to describe something, usually of a divine or mystical nature, due to the limitations of language, the writer's incompetence, or the nature itself of the thing being described—abound in the tale, from the description of Ivan Ivanovich's coat in the first chapter ("There is no describing: velvet! silver! fire! Lord God!"[24]) to the description of the banquet in Chapter 7:

> I will not describe the dishes that were set on the table! I will say nothing of the mnishki with sour cream, nor the tripe served with the borscht, nor the turkey with plums and raisins, nor the dish that looked very much like boots soaked in kvass, nor the sauce that was the swan song of an old-style cook—a sauce served all enveloped in a spirituous flame, which greatly amused and at the same time frightened the ladies. I will not speak of these dishes, because I much prefer eating them to holding forth on them in conversation.[25]

The same episode that features this description also introduces the encounter of Ivan Ivanovich and Ivan Nikiforovich at the table during the banquet, during which the narrator's apophatic speech borders on silence (or on the absence of writing): "At one and the same moment, Ivan Nikiforovich also glanced up!... No!... I can't... Give me another pen! My pen is sluggish, lifeless, the slit is too fine for this picture! Their faces became as if petrified in an expression of amazement. Each of them beheld a long-familiar face, to which it would seem one was ready to go up instinctively, as to an unexpected friend...."[26] As he invokes his incapacity to describe objects or scenes he apparently believes to be ineffable, the narrator in the story ends up describing these same objects or

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[22] "Preterition, n.," in *Oxford English Dictionary Online*: <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50188182> (accessed 16 June 2009).

[23] Gogol, *Collected Tales* 215. My emphasis.

[24] Gogol, *Collected Tales* 194.

[25] Gogol, *Collected Tales* 236-7.

[26] Gogol, *Collected Tales* 237.

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scenes, in the first example above by bringing up the variety of materials used in the confection of Ivan Ivanovich's coat, in the second example by bringing up the variety of foods, and also his predilection to eating them instead of writing about them, and in the third example by referring directly to his own incapacity to describe faithfully and vividly the scene he witnessed.

These instances of apophatic speech play an important role in the literary pretensions of the narrator as well as in a meta-literary analysis of the text. As Popkin writes, "By expatiating on what he has 'no intention of describing', Gogol mocks the necessary intentionality of verbal description.... By describing at length what he assumes is 'superfluous to describe', however, Gogol foregrounds his own abuses of these acknowledged 'exigencies of the medium'."[27] In fact, a look at relations between narrative time and the rendition of the events in the text shows that Gogol' is constantly driving the text to the limits of its expressivity, either by glossing over events of great importance to the plot, or by dedicating entire pages to descriptions of seemingly insignificant events. Therefore, by focusing on such superfluous details as Ivan Ivanovich's coat and the dishes at the banquet, Gogol' aims at establishing one of the extremes of a "realistic" description by a narrator who has an existence of his own, as an eyewitness to the events and an acquaintance of both Ivans'. At the same time, as he makes the narrator initially shun these descriptions through the use of apophasis, Gogol' at once endows him with a personal stylistic quirk (thus making him seem more realistic) and emphasizes the reliance of the text on rhetorical devices that reinforce its artificial and artistic aspects (thus making the text seem less realistic). In fact, Gukovskii claims that the figure of the narrator appears as "stylistically concretized," yet at the same time as the "spiritual essence of that set of events being narrated, as the voice of that collective vulgarity (*kollektivnoi poshlosti*) being depicted in the tale."[28] Thus the narrator is part and parcel of that world (Mirgorod) he is depicting, and as such he appears to the reader at once as a "realistic" individual with a characteristic rhetorical style and as the utmost expression of the general *poshlost'* or vulgarity that characterizes the inhabitants of Mirgorod.

A reading of the character as a product of the environment, as Gukovskii and Lotman suggest, may be effective for the main characters as well as for the narrator; it may also account for the difference in mood of the narrator between the beginning and the end of the story, but in this aspect it also inevitably brings forth the issue of temporal relations in the story. This question is expressed primarily through the delay between the moment the events took place and the moment they are narrated, something that is arguably inherent to *skaz*, the narrative style in which Gogol''s Ukrainian tales (including the tale of the two

[27] Popkin 163–164.

[28] Gukovskii 220. My translation.

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Ivans) are presumably written. A look at the inner chronology of the story can help clarify this question. The 'Two Ivans' has a somewhat clear timeline: the entire story is narrated linearly, within an unspecified but relatively short time-frame, from the first chapter—which, in reality, consists entirely of descriptions and short anecdotes of the lives of the two Ivans, with no specific temporal connection—to the second argument between Ivan Ivanovich and Ivan Nikiforovich in chapter 7. In the last paragraph of that section of the chapter, it is narrated how, after one whole month locked in his house out of shame for having been called a gander in front of a crowd, Ivan Ivanovich brings his "ancestral silver roubles"[29] (*starye, dedovskie karbovantsy!*[30]) to the courthouse, and receives the news that the whole matter would be solved the next day. The narrator concludes thus: "Alas! since then, the court has informed him daily for the past ten years that the case would be concluded the next day!"[31]

This sentence presents some temporal markers: it becomes clear from the narrator's perspective that he is writing this story at least ten years after Ivan Ivanovich's visit to the courthouse with the old roubles, which in its turn took place one month after the banquet. The banquet took place some undetermined time after the quarrel (which, incidentally, occurred on 7 July 1810, according to Ivan Ivanovich's petition[32]). After Ivan Nikiforovich brings in a second petition to the courthouse (since the first one had been robbed by Ivan Ivanovich's brown sow), the narrator writes that it "was marked, recorded, assigned a number, filed, signed, all on one and on the same day, and the case was put on a shelf, where it lay and lay and lay—a year, another, a third."[33] Following a description of other events that took place in Mirgorod, as a sign of the passing of time, the narrator writes that "Meanwhile there took place an extremely important event for the whole of Mirgorod,"[34] namely the banquet. Thus it is unclear how long after the quarrel the banquet took place, but, assuming it would have taken place still in 1810 (at the earliest), it is safe to assert that the narrator would have finished writing the section preceding the epilogue not earlier than 1820.

The following section then starts with the sentence "Some five years ago I passed through the town of Mirgorod,"[35] which automatically sets both that section and the previous narration in perspective: the events narrated in the beginning took place in 1810 and thereafter, and a significant time later, "five years ago," the final events take place. Since then, the two Ivans have grown old,

[29] Gogol, *Collected Tales* 239.
[30] Gogol', *PSS* 2: 274.
[31] Gogol, *Collected Tales* 240.
[32] Gogol, *Collected Tales* 217.
[33] Gogol, *Collected Tales* 230.
[34] Gogol, *Collected Tales* 230.
[35] Gogol, *Collected Tales* 240.

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and other characters (such as the judge) have died. An important question then is what is precisely the time interval between the last lines of the previous section (with the reference to the ten years that have gone by since Ivan Ivanovich's visit to the courthouse) and the beginning of the new section, with its reference to the narrator's visit to Mirgorod "some five years ago," and his remark that he "hadn't seen Mirgorod for twelve years."[36] From these two remarks it can be concluded that the narrator is writing down the epilogue seventeen years since he had left Mirgorod for the first time. If he had still been in Mirgorod to witness the quarrel between Ivan Ivanovich and Ivan Nikiforovich and left right afterwards, he would have written the epilogue in 1827 at the earliest. In that case, his visit to the town would have taken place in 1822, at least two years after he finished writing the previous section.

If the narrator is recording in 1827 events that took place in 1822, the hypothesis that his exclamation at the end of the story would have been influenced directly by his visit through bad weather five years before is implausible. It is possible to conceive of the narrator becoming sad upon remembering the dreariness of the day of his return to Mirgorod, the same way that remembering Ivan Ivanovich's coat makes him joyful or remembering the types of food served at the banquet might make him feel hungry. But these reactions are all product of remembrance rather than of actual experience there and then. This realization is particularly important to counteract the view that the narrator's mood is purely a response to a sudden awareness of time and distance. In fact, it cannot be regarded as such without the acknowledgement that even this "sudden" awareness is delayed, as it is materialized in writing five years after the narrator's visit. The same delay may be a determining factor in the narrator's style in the remainder of the text, as, given the chronology that has just been established, it is highly probable that the main section of the tale was also written, at least in part, when the narrator was already away from Mirgorod.

Such a delay between the event and the act of writing is almost inherent to narration in its conventional temporal sequence (when events precede their narration), e.g., in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*: "After a whole year of writing, Tristram realizes that all he has recorded is the first day of his life. Narration thus always lags behind living, and consequently the more he writes, the more he will have to write about."[37] The condition of the narrator in the 'Two Ivans' is not so extreme as in *Tristram Shandy*, but the delay—of which he is aware—is present nonetheless. This does not eliminate altogether the possibility that Fanger's suggestion about the narrator's exclamation might be correct; instead, it only makes it more difficult to pinpoint the motivation for

[36] Gogol, *Collected Tales* 240.

[37] Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (New York: Routledge, 1983) 90.

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that remark: does it refer to the dreary day on his visit to Mirgorod, or is it a commentary on the entire story that had been narrated, as Setchkarev and others seem to suggest?

Philological evidence shows that Sterne was an inspiration for Gogol' as he was writing the 'Two Ivans,' which would explain in part the role played by rhetorical devices in the narrator's recollections, as well as the abundance of seemingly superfluous detail and other elements:

> In the whole style of storytelling, in the construction of the plot of the 'Two Ivans', in the style of character description and in the *skaz*'s own comical methods—the influence of Laurence Sterne's famous novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (published in Russian translation in the beginning of the nineteenth century) was displayed. The comical alogism, the accumulation of details, the authorial asides that do not have any direct relationship with the action, the principles of the characters' elements of speech—these elements coincide extensively with Sterne's. Gogol''s contemporaries also recognized this connection between Gogol' and Sterne....[38]

Perhaps it was not only in these aspects that Gogol' drew inspiration from Sterne, but also in the emergence of the theme of *skuka* that culminates with the last sentence of the story, even if it is interpreted as a pure rhetorical device to lead the tale to an end. As Reinhard Kuhn writes,

> Instead of a lengthy and mock-learned discourse of the kind he had devoted to such momentous subjects as moustaches and buttonholes, Sterne, in a rare moment of self-control, limits himself to writing across the middle of the page in large capital letters the single word SPLEEN (VII, xix). The brevity of this digression is at odds with the seminal importance of the concept in this "fatrasie" [from "fatras," Fr. for "jumble"].[39]

Although Sterne's narrator suffers from spleen rather than *skuka* or even ennui, these terms are confused in Russian literature since at least Pushkin's *Evgenii Onegin* (1825–1832), in which the narrator defines Onegin's psychological malaise as "Similar to English *spleen,*/In brief: Russian *khandra.*"[40] According to Vladimir Nabokov, "*skuka* ("boredom," "tedium," "dullness") and *toska* (a preying misery, a gnawing mental ache)" are used as synonyms of *khandra* in the novel "according to [Pushkin's] prosodic needs."[41]

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[38] Nikolai L. Stepanov, ed., "Kommentarii. Povest' o tom, kak possorilsia Ivan Ivanovich s Ivanom Nikiforovichem," in *PSS* 2: 759. My translation.

[39] Reinhard Kuhn, *The Demon of Noontide: Ennui in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976) 133.

[40] Aleksandr S. Pushkin, *Evgenii Onegin*, in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 5 (Moscow: Akademiia nauk SSSR, Institut russkoi literatury, 1964) 26. Chapter One, Stanza XXXVIII, Lines 3–4. My translation.

[41] Vladimir Nabokov, "Commentary on Preliminaries and Chapters One to Five," in *Eugene Onegin*, by Aleksandr Pushkin, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press,

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Khandra is further equated with the notion of hypochondria, manifested as both "spleen" to the English and "ennui" to the French.[42] The notions of *skuka* and spleen had already been viewed as synonyms in Russia by Nikolai Karamzin in the *Pis'ma russkogo puteshestvennika* [Letters of a Russian Traveler] (1791–1795), in which he writes from England: "Whoever thinks that happiness lies in wealth and in abundance of things must be shown many local Croesus, strewn with the means to take pleasure, losing the taste of all delights and dying in their souls long before death. This is the English *spleen*! This moral disease can also be called by a Russian name: *skuka*..."[43]

On the other hand, in *Evgenii Onegin* these terms, even though they are largely synonymous, are used in different circumstances, and thus acquire different nuances. *Skuka*, appearing as early as the first stanza of chapter One of the novel ("But, dear Lord, what a bore (*kakaia skuka*)"[44]), becomes "a permanent companion of the hero," and for this reason "is characterized by a high frequency of use and at the same time by remaining specifically unnoticeable: this is a familiar, prosaic, ordinary word,"[45] as opposed to spleen and *khandra*, which are more precisely characterized as diseases: "A disease is nonetheless a sign of life, whereas *skuka* tends towards 'spiritual emptiness'[46] and mortal apathy (*mertvennosti*)."[47] Furthermore, *skuka* tends to acquire, in Pushkin's conception in the novel as well as in his poetry (e.g., in "Stsena iz Fausta" ["Scene from Faust," 1825], in which Faust complains to Mephistopheles of his ennui), a "universal-metaphysical sense... independent from the circumstances in the social and historical planes."[48] It is possibly this universal aspect of *skuka* that is also manifested so laconically in the last sentence of the 'Two Ivans,' with its reference to "this world," understood at once as Mirgorod and as the world-at-large.

Yet *skuka* is also present in other parts of the tale, e.g., in Ivan Ivanovich's question on what he does not possess in the world, expressed by means of three different phrasings in a single thought, in perhaps the ultimate manifestation of the despair and "spiritual emptiness" that can be brought about by *skuka*: "Lord

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1975) 156.

[42] Nabokov 151–152.

[43] Nikolai M. Karamzin, *Pis'ma russkogo puteshestvennika* (Leningrad: Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1984) 383. My translation.

[44] Pushkin p. 9. One: I: 6. My translation. In Russian, the line reads: "Но, Боже мой, какая скука."

[45] Vladimir A. Viktorovich, "Skuka," in *Oneginskaia entsiklopediia,* edited by Natal'ia I. Mikhailova, vol. 2 (Moscow: Russkii put', 2004) 507. My translation.

[46] Pushkin p. 28. One: XLIV: 2.

[47] Viktorovich 507.

[48] Viktorovich 508.

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God, what a proprietor I am! Is there anything I haven't got?... What is there that I haven't got?... I'd like to know, what haven't I got?"[49] Such a moment of satisfaction at one's possessions (or likewise of the absence of a goal), and subsequent search for something else to be conquered or obtained, can be grounded on the idea of boredom, which, in Arthur Schopenhauer's conception, acquires the same connotations as ennui/*skuka*: "Behind *need and want* is to be found at once *boredom*, which attacks even the more intelligent animals. This is a consequence of the fact that life has no *genuine intrinsic worth*, but is kept in *motion* merely by want and illusion. But as soon as this comes to a standstill, the utter barrenness and emptiness of existence become apparent."[50] To Schopenhauer, thus, all motion in life is illusory and pointless, like Ivan Ivanovich's obsession with Ivan Nikiforovich's gun: it offers a new entertainment for his mind, but in itself it brings no benefit to him other than distraction from the "barrenness and emptiness" of his life.

It is thus not surprising that one of the main uses of the word *skuka* in Russian, in addition to its usual meaning of "burdensome feeling from stagnant, idle, inactive condition of the soul; languor of inactivity," refers to a "desire to see someone, to receive something."[51] Ivan Ivanovich's manifestation of satisfaction at his possessions is at once grounded in *skuka* and is the trigger for a new manifestation of *skuka*. His question on what he does not have shows that he has reached, or at least thinks he has reached, a state of inactivity from the fact that there is nothing else left for him to attain. At the same time, as soon as this primordial feeling of *skuka* might be allowed to settle, Ivan Ivanovich's eyes "sought new objects, stepped over the fence into Ivan Nikiforovich's yard, and involuntarily became occupied with a curious spectacle"[52] as the old woman in Ivan Nikiforovich's house hangs his clothes, and various other objects, to dry in the courtyard. She then brings out Ivan Nikiforovich's gun, at the sight of which Ivan Ivanovich muses about its possession: "A nice little thing, too! I've long wanted to get myself one like it. I'd really like to have that little gun; I love fooling with guns."[53] The desire to possess the gun and the realization that he had long wanted to have one such gun distract Ivan Ivanovich from the *skuka* he might feel as a result of inactivity, but it is in itself a manifestation of the other

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[49] Gogol, *Collected Tales* 199. See also note 13 above for a more precise rendition of Ivan Ivanovich's second question.

[50] Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974) 287. Emphases in the original.

[51] Vladimir Dal', "Skuka," in *Tolkovyi slovar' zhivogo velikorusskogo iazyka*, vol. 4 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo innostrannykh i natsional'nykh slovarei, 1956) 212. My translation. This sense can be perceived, for example, in the verb and complement "скучать по ком, по чем" (Dal' 213).

[52] Gogol, *Collected Tales* 199.

[53] Gogol, *Collected Tales* 200.

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notion of *skuka* as the desire to possess something which is absent from one's present existence. In fact, the sense of absence lies at the core of the concept of *skuka*, to the extent that this word represents a negative condition, an absence of action, of a goal in someone's life, and likewise the absence of an object in someone's possession.

This feeling of absence can be likewise associated with the notion of estrangement, which is a fundamental characteristic of ennui: "In the state of ennui the world is emptied of its significance.... We approach the world of the absurd, the world associated with Kafka and Camus, but which they did not invent."[54] Absurd is understood here as in one of Albert Camus's definitions of the term: "L'absurde est essentiellement un divorce. Il n'est ni dans l'un ni dans l'autre des éléments comparés.... Il est pour le moment le seul lien qui les unisse."[55] Thus the absurd is simultaneously the divorce between man and the surrounding world, and the only possible rapport between these two elements. It is a sense of the absurd that strikes readers—and landowners—when they meet a character in search of dead souls for sale in Gogol''s *Mertvye dushi* [Dead Souls]. This sense of the absurd is also present in the 'Two Ivans,' from the choice of a seemingly insignificant subject matter to be narrated, to the multitude of lines in chapter 1 dedicated to the praise of Ivan Ivanovich's coat, and ultimately to the seeming gratuity of the quarrel and the ultimate disagreement between the two Ivans.

Gogol''s prose in the 'Two Ivans,' overflowing with words that appear to be absolutely superfluous, may be itself a reaction to and simultaneously a product of the emptiness of spirit (and also physical emptiness) symptomatic of *skuka*. The instances of preterite speech that occur throughout the text are some of the most convincing evidence of this dual impulse characteristic of *skuka*, to the extent that they allow the narrator to manifest a negativity or an absence of discourse at the same time that he vainly attempts to fulfill that absence of discourse with words: "I suppose that to describe the way in which Ivan Nikiforovich put on his balloon trousers, wrapped a tie around his neck, and finally put on the nankeen jacket, which had a split under the left arm, is completely superfluous."[56] In this aspect, the preterite speech can also be seen as an attempt by the narrator to reproduce some of the conventional outpourings of feeling typical of narrators in sentimental literature, e.g., in the following passage toward the end of Karamzin's "Bednaia Liza" [Poor Liza]: "But I cannot describe everything that they spoke upon that occasion. On the next day

[54] Kuhn 12–13.

[55] Albert Camus, "Le Mythe de Sisyphe," in *Œuvres Complètes D'Albert Camus*, vol. 1 (Paris: Aux éditions du Club de l'Honnête Homme, 1983) 156.

[56] Gogol, *Collected Tales* 235.

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there was bound to take place their last encounter."[57] In this case, however, the sentimental narrator actually does what he says he will do, unlike Gogol''s narrator. Thus the narrator of the 'Two Ivans' appears to be aware of certain conventions of sentimentalism, such as the confessional style as he constantly comments on the events and inserts his own personal narratives; these conventions are more pervasive in the epilogue, in which from the start the narrator figures as an active figure, and in which the final sentence sounds curiously opposed to the conclusion of Karamzin's tale: "Nowadays [i.e. after both Liza and her beloved Erast have died], perhaps, they have already reconciled!"[58]

On the other hand, neither the conclusion to the 'Two Ivans' nor its entire development can be seen as bringing any relief from *skuka* to the narrator; instead, his final words only express in a concise manner the same feeling of *skuka* that can be perceived as the underlying condition of the two Ivans, and also of the narrator, who appears in his presumed self-depictions during the quarrel in Ivan Nikiforovich's house and at the banquet as an alienated character, a silent spectator of the events characterized solely by a frock coat and a strange obsession with his nose. As a result, neither the narrator nor the two Ivans, who stay behind in Mirgorod and are revisited by the narrator more than a decade after their quarrel, seem to have overcome the *skuka* that affects their existence. Possibly the most convincing evidence of this failure to overcome *skuka* is the narrator's realization of the condition that affects "this world."

Yet it might also be claimed that the realization of this condition is not enough to put an end to the story. Towards the end of the tale, Ivan Ivanovich's eternal wait for a verdict that would come out tomorrow (or next week to Ivan Nikiforovich) reads like a travesty of the myth of Sisyphus, eternally hauling a stone up a mountain, only to see it roll down the other side; the Ivans are not the agents, but their wait has the same character of pointless repetition as Sisyphus's action. Camus writes of his struggle: "La lutte elle-même vers les sommets suffit à remplir un coeur d'homme. Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux."[59] Apparently the narrator in the 'Two Ivans' also wants us to imagine Ivan Ivanovich happy: "After the preliminary greetings, Ivan Ivanovich turned to me with that joyful

[57] Nikolai Karamzin, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia* (Moscow: Detskaia literatura, 1966) 49. My translation. Robert Maguire also discusses a manifestation of sentimentalism in the story, in Ivan Ivanovich's language and manners: see Maguire 38. Furthermore, Gogol''s subversion of the code of sentimentalism and its candid manifestations of friendship and love might also reinforce those interpretations that emphasize the erotic aspect of the tale, such as by Ermakov; Hugh McLean, "Gogol's Retreat from Love: Toward an Interpretation of *Mirgorod*," in *American Contributions to the Fourth International Congress of Slavicists* (The Hague: Mouton, 1958) 223–244; and Simon Karlinsky, *The Sexual Labyrinth of Nikolai Gogol* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976) 67–77.

[58] Karamzin 53. My translation.

[59] Camus 238.

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smile which was always so becoming to his funnel-like face, and said: 'Shall I inform you of some pleasant news?' 'What news?' I said. 'My case will be decided tomorrow without fail. The court says it's certain'."[60] In its temporal aspect *skuka*, as the manifestation of an absence and of the desire to "fill the void," is characterized by this very yearning and unsettlement that looks toward the past or the future to find relief: Ivan Ivanovich's illusory self-satisfaction at his possessions refers to his *past* achievements and exposes his momentary condition of inactivity, whereas his constant hope in the solution of his case in a *tomorrow* that will most likely never take place represents this forward-looking aspect of *skuka*, the attempt at escaping from the divorce between man and environment characteristic of his present existence. The inner chronology of a text written as a recollection of events that most likely took place long before they were written down (cf. the author's note preceding chapter 1, in which he writes that the events described "relate to a long-gone time.... Nowadays Mirgorod is completely different"[61]) reinforces the irresolvable aspect of *skuka*, as the very recollection is in itself an attempt to overcome the barrier of time and the absurdist divorce between subject and object, respectively understood as the narrator and Mirgorod.

This absurdist divorce becomes most evident in the setting of the first quarrel between the two Ivans. Ivan Nikiforovich is lying naked alone on the floor inside a camera obscura, in which the sunlight, penetrating the dark room through a small gap in one of the shutters, "turned iridescent and, striking the opposite wall, drew on it a colorful landscape of rush roofs, trees, and the clothing hanging outside, only all of it inverted. This lent the room a sort of wondrous half-light."[62] One might wonder why exactly Gogol' decided to place the key scene of the tale in such an unusual setting. Was he attempting to show that, just as at that moment the civilized and the natural men were meeting (to draw on Ermakov's explanation for Ivan Nikiforovich's nakedness), the outside, unrestrained world and the inside, domestic world were also meeting in one space inside Ivan Nikiforovich's house? Lotman hints at that possibility when he writes that "the 'inverted' landscape is given an opposite function—it becomes the means of creating a miniature space.... The landscape on the wall of Ivan Nikiforovich's room, diminished in size, placed in the dark room and devoid of its upper half, is like a parody on Gogol''s beloved unlimited view of the surface of the Earth, reflected on the surface of the water."[63] This miniature world, then,

[60] Gogol, *Collected Tales* 241. The last sentence reads somewhat differently in Russian: "Палата сказала наверное." (Gogol', *PSS* 2: 276).

[61] Gogol', *PSS* 2: 221. My translation. This note is omitted in the Pevear and Volokhonsky translation.

[62] Gogol, *Collected Tales* 202.

[63] Lotman 433. My translation.

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travestied as a seascape, with the sky transformed into a mass of water, relates coincidentally to a possible translation of the term used by the inventors of the camera obscura to refer to the device: "Mo Ti was the first to record the creation of an inverted image with a pinhole in a screen, which has been variously translated as a 'collecting place' (the rays of light meeting at a pinhole), etc, but perhaps most appropriately as a 'locked treasure room'."[64] In the "collecting place," the outside world is miniaturized, reduced to a fathomable dimension, but at the same time made into a two-dimensional projection, an image on a wall to which the subject can only relate by means of vision—a sense to which the narrator never ceases to refer in the tale, marking his descriptions by comments such as "a picture such as painters love!"[65] or "Oh, if I were a painter...."[66] For this matter, the camera obscura arises as a site for an all-revealing painting:

> In *Tristram Shandy* Laurence Sterne made verbal play of the phrase "drawing of a character" and deviously entangles the artist. "One of these you will see drawing a full-length character against the light;—that's illiberal,—dishonest,—and hard upon the character of the man who sits. Others, to mend the matter, will make a drawing of you in the camera;—that is most unfair of all,—because, there you are sure to be represented in some of your most ridiculous attitudes."[67]

This sounds particularly apropos in light of Ivan Nikiforovich's nakedness and of the discussion that ensues once he refuses to sell the gun.

The setting of the quarrel, the utmost sign of Ivan Nikiforovich's absurdist divorce from the world and of Ivan Ivanovich's "visual dislocation"[68] (and also of the two Ivans' eventual alienation from their mutual friendship), also underscores the element of *skuka* present in the scene, as pointed out by Mikhail Vaiskopf when writing about Plato's myth of the cave in the tale: "to the 'half-light' of the camera obscura corresponds the tearful sky without a bright spot at the end of the tale, hanging over the dirty damp town, allowing for the possibility of the negative-punning interpretation (*negativno-kalamburnogo tolkovaniia*) of 'this world' in the concluding sentence..."[69] The pun is constructed on the double meaning of the Russian word *svet*: "world" and "light." Therefore, both the image of dreariness in the epilogue and the quarrel scene inside the camera obscura can be seen as metaphors of the condition of unenlightened humankind, unaware of the existence of a transcendent reality. The result is an all-encompassing *skuka* that affects (in the sense of boredom or ennui) the

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[64] John H. Hammond, *The Camera Obscura: A Chronicle* (Bristol: Hilger, 1981) 1.
[65] Gogol, *Collected Tales* 202.
[66] Gogol, *Collected Tales* 211.
[67] Hammond 95.
[68] Maguire 181.
[69] Mikhail Vaiskopf, *Siuzhet Gogolia: Morfologiia. Ideologiia. Kontekst* (Moscow: Radiks, 1993) 222. My translation.

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narrator, as the alienated boy picking on his nose as he witnesses the quarrel (and as the man visiting Mirgorod years later and feeling dull when the weather was dull), as well as Ivan Nikiforovich, the epitome of physical inactivity and incommunicability as he lies naked and alone in a dark room, and Ivan Ivanovich, whose yearning for Ivan Nikiforovich's weapon is the utmost manifestation of the connotation of *skuka* as "absence." The two Ivans' subsequent activity in the tale "does not spring from the desire to create something, it is characterized by their will for mutual destruction,"[70] standing for the degenerative power of *skuka* that contrasts so explicitly with the narrator's vigorous excitement in the main part of the text.

Unawares even to the narrator, however, *skuka* had been present in Mirgorod from the beginning of his narration, starting from Ivan Ivanovich's musings on his possessions in chapter 2. Isn't it possible therefore to read the 'Two Ivans' as a reaction and simultaneously a product of this feeling that surrounds the narrator and accompanies him upon his return to Mirgorod? As Kuhn writes in relation to ennui, "if it does not engulf its victim, [it] can and often does induce efforts to fill the void that it hollows out. It is the state that, if it does not make sterile, precedes and makes possible creation in the realms of the practical, the spiritual, and the aesthetic."[71] The same may be true about *skuka*: maybe the 'Two Ivans' is a particularly fruitful—perhaps all too fruitful—product of boredom, an attempt to "fill the void" that fills it up beyond the rim. But, beyond its aspect as a performance, it is also a tale about the mediocre and self-conceited existence of the two main characters and other inhabitants of Mirgorod—and, perhaps, of the narrator himself.

Skuka in the 'Two Ivans' thus lies at the core of the fundamental approaches to Gogol''s art, the one that sees his works as primarily rhetorical performances, and the other that attempts to find an overarching thrust to his literary creation. Maguire claims that the quarrel between the two Ivans "is an argument about one's fundamental place in the world."[72] In the way that the theme of *skuka* relates to the absurdist element of the tale, it also becomes the way through which the argument of the quarrel is extended to the whole text: thus the 'Two Ivans' can be read as an argument about one's identity, as it relates to the two Ivans, the narrator, and an author who, with this tale, was bidding farewell to the "folkloric" Ukrainian theme in his literature.

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[70] Mikhail B. Khrapchenko, *Nikolai Gogol': Literaturnyi put'. Velichie pisatelia* (Moscow: Sovremennik, 1984) 142. My translation.

[71] Kuhn 378.

[72] Maguire 48.

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